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William J. Meyer, *Metaphysics and the Future of Theology: The Voice of Theology in Public Life*, with foreword by Schubert M. Ogden, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 126 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), xvi + 610 pp. \$50. ISBN 978-1-60608-322-1 (pbk).

The central thesis of this systematic, cogent, big study is that modern theology has lost the ability to engage seriously in public debate and that its marginalization can be resolved only by a new turn to metaphysics, the ‘rational or philosophical attempt to understand and express the ultimate character of reality’ (p. xi). Only by recovering metaphysical horizons will theologians again be able truly to speak to the realities of life and thereby break out of what has become merely private conversation among like-minded people sharing methodological dispositions.

In Part One, Meyer diagnoses the current plight of theology. He finds some partial positives within the industrial-scale discussion of the place of theology in the (primarily American) public square. These include the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas, who both suggest in strong historicist vein that theism’s metaphysical basis can be interrogated indirectly, via tradition-constituted modes of authority that derive their validity from endorsement by authority figures. Meyer also approves Jeffrey Stout’s promotion of George Hunsinger’s Barthianism, which combines immanent criticism and inferential reasoning with authentic Christian witness. Yet by prescinding from direct metaphysical discourse, these various approaches are, Meyer protests, all ultimately complicit in the rejection of metaphysics.

The background motives for this rejection lie, Meyer argues, in four connected metaphysical errors. Metaphysics has been seen as delivering existential certainty rather than fallible representation. Its arguments have mistakenly been regarded as commanding assent and thereby directly establishing outcomes, not as reasonings offered to validate truth claims that have in fact been made. Metaphysics has been assumed to provide epistemological certainty, whereas no discourse can provide more than fallible propositions open to revision, even if arguing logically.

Metaphysics has privileged a view of God as static, complete and self-sufficient over a dipolar conception in which understanding of God is inextricably linked to understanding of the world.

Part Two of Meyer's study comprises six chapters on James Gustafson, Reinhold Niebuhr, Hauerwas, Jean Porter, John Milbank and Franklin Gamwell. In the short space of this review I cannot summarize all positions and comparisons, so shall attend especially to an aspect of special interest to readers of this journal: the place and role of the Church in public life and discourse as seen by each theologian. In his 'accountable' theology, Gustafson seeks to accommodate outside insights in order to make theology intelligible to the academy and other publics. But because theology is for him reflection on piety, it cannot be made rationally convincing to those publics, and therefore remains a confessional discourse for use within the Church. Niebuhr develops a 'pragmatic' theology to give meaning to human existence and ground ethics and social critique. But his theology is ultimately mysterious and non-rational, based on a view of scripture and doctrine as sources of myths to help Christians make sense of their place in the world, rather than as resources to promote mission or social change.

For Gustafson and Niebuhr, both Reformed Protestants, the Church has no particular role in validating theological discourse or promoting theological truth claims in society. It is accorded a far greater role in the 'witness' theology of Hauerwas, a Methodist with Anglican sympathies, in which the Church is a sanctified community of people trained under tutelage and shaped by a formative narrative. The Church is called not to make theology intelligible to humankind but to live faithfully to Christ as a countercultural community of virtue. Although such a high ecclesiology might give heart to church professionals, it is vulnerable to authoritarianism and hubris. Moreover, a fundamental Protestant (and metaphysical) principle seems to be that the earthly Church can exhibit only a finite witness that must always point beyond itself. In the 'tradition-engaged' theology of Jean Porter, a Roman Catholic, Thomist natural theology is situated within a view of reason as constituted by tradition, with Hauerwas' high ecclesiology complemented by a strong sense of the Church as historical community. But, Meyer contends, because of her willingness to dissociate proximate (i.e.,

particular) moral goods from universal goods, Porter gains few benefits from that theology. In fact, he avers, she even lends tacit support to secularist construals of ethics.

John Milbank addresses the metaphysical challenge head-on in his ‘radical-orthodox’ theology, wishing to resituate metaphysics within theology and thereby overturn the view of metaphysics as a secular philosophical enterprise capable of passing judgment on theology. Despite his Anglicanism, Milbank also presents an exalted role for the Church in embodying divine truth. But Meyer argues at length that Milbank maintains insufficient differentiation between God and creation, believing that God does everything. This is linked to Milbank’s use of the Neoplatonic idea of participation, which leads him to disavow human autonomy, reason, creativity, democracy and difference. Underlying these multiple rejections, Meyer opines, is Milbank’s stand, with Aquinas contra Scotus, against univocity. In his doctrine of analogy, Aquinas locates all truth in God as the infinitely powerful origin of all events, truth and meaning in the world, leaving the world itself with nothing.

To compensate these deficiencies, Meyer turns to Gamwell’s ‘transcendental-process’ theology, which satisfies his desire to return to metaphysics. This is not, however, a retrieval of medieval concepts of act, being, mind or substance. On the contrary, Meyer asserts the necessity of freeing metaphysics ‘once and for all from classical theistic assumptions’ (p. 150). Gamwell’s particular metaphysics is process metaphysics, which exhibits all four of the features for which Meyer has been searching. It is intelligible, committed to making claims comprehensible to others. It is credible, seeking to make claims convincing to others. It refuses any ethics autonomous of theology or any intellectual enquiry from which metaphysics is absent.

In this process theology, the all-inclusive reality is God but the created order makes a real creative contribution to its plenitude. Moreover, God is fundamentally temporal, with the primary metaphysical category not eternity but time, mirrored in a world that is itself changing, dynamic and ecologically fragile. God provides a diverse cosmos with its overarching unity and final purpose. Experience is always prior to reflection, and even divine knowledge increases as new possibilities

become actualized. The whole includes tension and difference: there is 'no pure tranquillity of order without remainder' (p. 536). Although neither Meyer nor Gamwell, an ordained Presbyterian, specify any associated process ecclesiology, we may surmise that such an ecclesiology will combine strong commitment to doctrinal development and transmission through time, as in Porter, with a relational view of Church, churches and world founded on a common discourse about ultimate truth and meaning.

Reading this book will reward anybody desiring a good critical summary of debates about the place of theology in the public square. This remains true even though the assessment of Milbank, who has recently shown considerable interest in process thought, needs updating. Meyer should also provoke readers who have not yet considered process claims seriously. He shows that the alternative for theologians is not a more credible form of metaphysics but a retreat from metaphysics and thereby from any serious voice in public life.

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